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SUBJECT: DECLINING FOOD SECURITY IN ZIMBABWE

REF: (a) Harare 710

(b) Harare 1448

(c) Harare 1447

Summary

1. The Ambassador traveled to Bikita, a district in hard-hit Masvingo Province, in early October to observe the food security situation. Although no overt signs of starvation were apparent, it was clear that deprivation had increased dramatically. The country's severe economic contraction and high inflation have put even basic foods beyond the reach of ordinary Zimbabweans. Millions of people are already in need of food assistance and the situation is likely to peak in December-January.

2. The GOZ has imported nearly half a million metric tons (MT) of grain since April, but it remains far from clear that it can import all of the 1.2 million MT needed. Moreover food distribution has been hampered by the country's severe fuel shortage and there are credible reports that the GOZ is withholding food assistance in advance of the Senate elections in late November. International food aid operations are increasing but the GOZ continues to limit their access, creating the potential for still greater hunger. End Summary.

Visit to Bikita District Paints Picture of Increasing Deprivation

3. During the week of October 2, 2005, the Ambassador and members of the USAID Mission traveled to Bikita, a district in Masvingo Province, to talk with rural communities about their current food situation. Masvingo Province, along with sections of Manicaland Province and Matabeleland North Province, has the poorest cereal availability and highest prices. CARE, the food partner that has distributed food and monitors food security in seven districts of Masvingo province, ranks Bikita fourth in terms of food insecurity this year.

4. The Ambassador's delegation spoke with residents of four communities in different wards of Bikita. Although we observed no overt signs of starvation, it is clear that deprivation is increasing dramatically. Residents reported that there had been no maize available from the local GMB since April 2005, i.e., since the last harvest. (Note: A Food For Peace food monitor found a small quantity for sale from the GMB in August. End note.) For a few months immediately after the harvest, local residents bought or worked in exchange for maize and, more recently, wheat at irrigation schemes and a few remaining farms located in a narrow "green belt" that runs through the district. The supply of cereal from these sources has dropped significantly during recent weeks.

5. Maize (meal) was for sale in only one of three shops visited around the district, but the price was more than four times the official GMB price, putting it out of reach for most shoppers. Seeds and fertilizer were also available in a commercial center, but were too expensive for the majority of local residents. The little income they occasionally get is spent entirely on food.

16. Because it is difficult to access maize and other cereals, they have no stocks at home. "Come see" said one woman. "It's so bare that the rats have left." Hence, Bikita residents are eating less cereal. They eat fewer and smaller meals, warding off hunger by eating wild fruits and seed pods. When they have cereal, they prepare porridge more often than the more substantial sadza (stiff porridge) - because it requires less meal. At one site, workers at a community garden that CARE helped develop last year revealed that many of them eat meals consisting only of vegetables from the garden (cabbage, onions, tomatoes, and rape, a green vegetable similar to collard greens). In other nearby locations, dams have dried up and even vegetables are difficult to access.

The National Food Crises

17. The situation in Bikita is replicated in most other parts of the country. In April 2005, Zimbabwean farmers harvested far less maize (4 - 600,000 MT) than is needed for the nation's human and animal consumption - approximately 1.6 to 1.8 million MT (reftel A). In response, the Government of Zimbabwe (GOZ) vowed to import 1.2 million MT of maize to assure that, until the next harvest, maize would be consistently available for purchase throughout the country at an affordable price.

18. As the staple food of Zimbabweans, the availability of maize is critical to food security. Regular monitoring by WFP, FEWSNET, USAID and C-SAFE (Consortium for Southern African Food Security Emergency, a USAID-supported NGO operation) has confirmed that most rural households have already exhausted the maize that they harvested. As predicted, the vast majority now must purchase their cereals. However, September reports from the WFP Vulnerability Assessment Mapping Unit's monitoring indicate that, across the country, maize is not available to buy or is difficult to access due to distance and/or high price.

19. The annual Vulnerability Assessment (VA) showed that, even if maize were available at a low price, not all households would be able to afford to buy what they need. Consequently, the GOZ agreed that the World Food Programme (WFP) may import 300,000 MT of food for free distribution to up to 2.9 million vulnerable people in rural households. This 2.9 million figure was based on assumptions that incomes would keep pace with the price of maize, and that 100% of household income could be spent to buy maize, two erroneous assumptions. Considering only the rural area, the number of people who cannot meet their needs will certainly be much higher - probably double the estimated 2.9 million.

110. No attempts have been made to quantify the urban population's needs, but on the heels of Operation Murambatsvina, which destroyed the livelihoods of the majority of informal traders, and left some 700,000 people homeless, a significant portion of the urban population is, no doubt, also food insecure. Furthermore, in urban areas, the more affordable (price-controlled) roller meal has disappeared from grocers' shelves, forcing customers to buy the more expensive (uncontrolled) super-refined meal. In the past week, even super-refined meal has become scarce in Harare

GOZ Efforts Fall Short of Needs

111. Reports of exports from the South African grain sales floor indicate that since April 30, 2005, a large quantity of maize (total 473,000 MT by September 30, 2005) has been purchased for delivery to Zimbabwe. If true, this would mean that the GOZ is on track to meet its goal of 1.2 MTs by next April. However, the GOZ regards grain import statistics as a state secret and there is no way to verify that all of this grain was actually delivered. There is also considerable skepticism within the international donor community that the GOZ can sustain the current pace of 100,000 MTs a month given the country's accelerating economic problems, especially the shortage of foreign exchange. In addition, grain deliveries to the depots through out the country have been erratic. As the Ambassador saw in Bikita, supplies are often unavailable at the GMB's subsidized price and when available sell out quickly.

112. Zimbabwe's fuel crisis is certainly a major explanation for why the imported grain is not making it to rural areas. However there are probably other

factors as well. There are credible reports that the GOZ is withholding food in order to use it politically in the late November Senate elections. Corruption is another likely explanation. Recently, for example, Leo Mugabe, businessman and Robert Mugabe's nephew, was arrested for allegedly illegally exporting food purchased at the subsidized price to Mozambique and Zambia at a substantial mark-up. There is also evidence that part of the purchased maize has not even reached Zimbabwe, including some held in ships anchored off the port of Beira, Mozambique for later resale.

Comparisons to past drought years

13. Compared to last year, one man in Bikita summed it up: "We've gone from the frying pan to the fire." Household Livelihood Surveys conducted by CARE in Bikita in each of the past three years estimated that this year and in 2003, on average, farmers produced enough cereal to meet only one month of their households' cereal needs, while in 2004, they produced enough to last about six months.

14. Bikita residents said that their current food situation is even worse than during Zimbabwe's worst drought of 1992-1993. Their explanation was not that the harvest was poorer, but instead they blamed economic factors, largely attributable to poor GOZ policy (reftel). In 1992-3 the GMB worked efficiently, and, thus, prices were affordable, and access to maize was good. To support food purchases, they worked at commercial farms, or sold livestock at favorable prices. Currently, the GMB's performance is poor and riddled with corruption. Zimbabwe's economy is contracting, and high inflation has made food and other essential necessities unaffordable. Casual farm work opportunities are scarcer because of the break up of many commercial farms. Livestock sales yield very little return. Operation Murambatsvina drove many people from the urban areas back to the rural areas, resulting in a significant drop in remittances and more competition for work and food.

15. In 1992, Zimbabwe had reserve stocks and the GOZ imported an additional 2.4 MT of maize before May 1993. Even so, Zimbabwe faced a humanitarian crisis and the USG provided Zimbabwe 590,939 MT of maize, which represented 27% of Zimbabwe's total maize consumption over the period of January 1992 through May 1993.

Comment:

16. Zimbabwe's food crisis is getting worse. Food is either unavailable or unaffordable for much of the country and hunger is rising. That said, given the level of imports and international assistance our best guess, as we have said before, is that Zimbabwe may get through this year without widespread starvation provided it can be distributed to where needed. This outcome will doubtless be trumpeted by the GOZ but in fact its refusal to acknowledge the need for assistance and to agree to a WFP appeal has put people lives at risk.

17. Moreover, next year promises to be even worse as the GOZ has been slow to distribute inputs and planting is well behind schedule (reftel C). Even good rains will not lead to a good harvest at this point. In addition, barring an epiphany, government policies will leave the country with even fewer resources next year to import food. Finally, because of the GOZ's arbitrary limit on the number of people who can receive food assistance, poor Zimbabweans will continue to deplete their coping mechanisms and will move deeper into poverty, foregoing meals, medical care, school fees and other essentials and leaving them more vulnerable in the future.

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